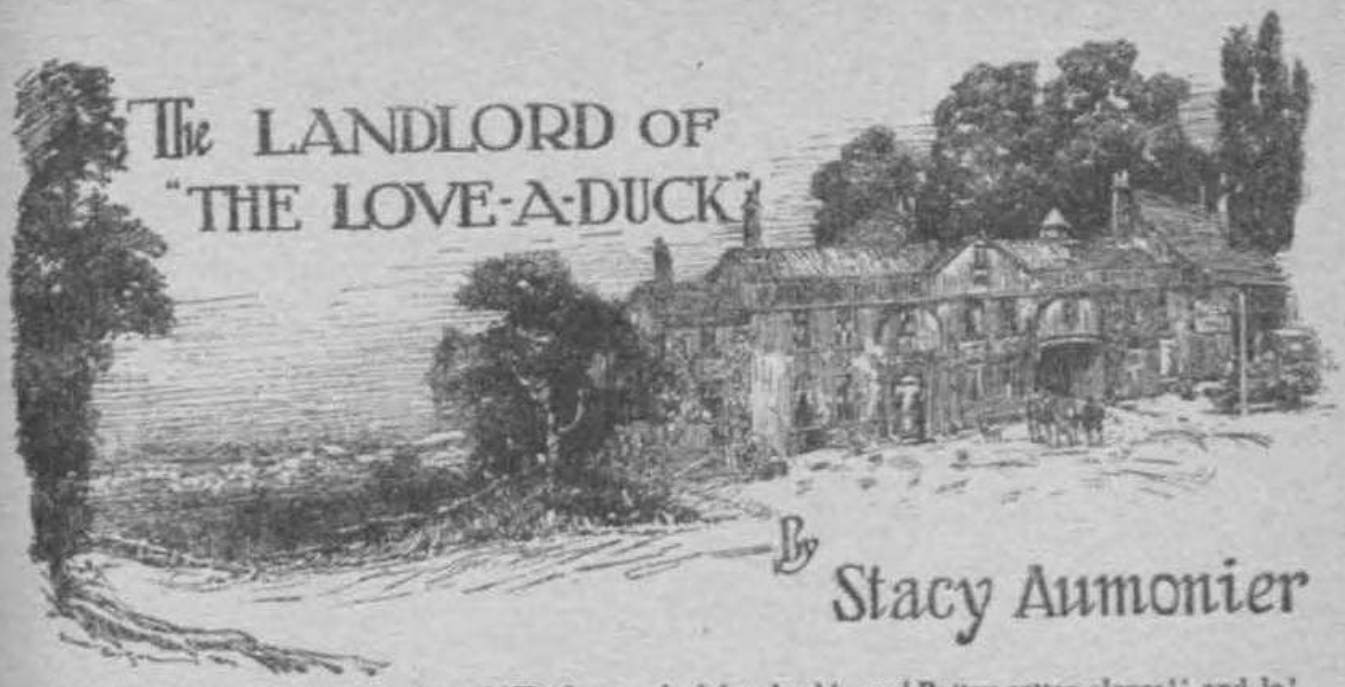
The LANDLORD OF "THE LOVE-A-DUCK"



By Stacy Aumonier

"I only have to creep into the bar of 'The Love-a-duck' and whisper 'Rotten cotton gloves!' and lo! all these forbidden luxuries are placed at my disposal."

I FORGET the name of the wag in our town who first called him Mr. Seldom Right, but the name caught on. His proper name was James Selden Wright, and the inference of this obvious misnomer was too good to drop. James was invariably wrong, but so lavishly, outrageously, magnificently wrong that he invariably carried the thing through with flying colours. He was a kind of Tartarin of Tibbelsford, which was the name of our town.

Everything about Mr. Seldom Right was big, impressive, expansive. He himself was an enormous person with fat, puffy cheeks with no determinate line between them and his innumerable chins. His large grey eyes with their tiny pupils seemed to embrace the whole universe in a glance. Upon his pendulous front there dangled thick gold chains with signets and seals like miniature flat-irons. His fingers were ribbed with gold bands like curtain-rings. His wife was big; his daughter was big; the great shire horses which worked on his adjoining farm seemed quite normal creatures in this Gargantuan scheme of things.

Above all "The Love-a-duck" was big. It appeared to dominate the town. It was built at the top of the hill, with great rambling corridors, bars, coffee-rooms, dilapidated ball-rooms, staircases of creaking deal, bedrooms where a four-post bed was difficult to find, a cobbled courtyard with a covered entrance-drive where two brewer's drays could have driven through abreast. There was no social function, no town council, no committee of importance that was not driven to meet at "The Love-a-duck." But the biggest thing in Tibbelsford was the voice of the landlord. At night amidst the glittering taps and tankards he would "preside." By this you must understand that the word be taken literally. He was no ordinary potman to hand mugs of ale across the bar to thirsty carters, or nips of gin to thin-lipped clerks.

He would not appear till the evening was well advanced, and then he would stroll in and lean against the bar, his sleepy eyes adjusting the various phenomena of his perspective to a comfortable focus.

And then the old cronies and characters of Tibbelsford would touch their hats and say:

"'Evening, Mr. Wright"

And he would nod gravely, like an Emperor receiving the fealty of his serfs. And a stranger might whisper:

"Who is this fat old guy?"

And the answer would be "H'sh!" for the eyes of Mr. Seldom Right missed nothing. Bumptious strangers were treated with complete indifference. If they addressed him, he looked right through them, and breathed heavily. But for the cronies and characters there was a finely adjusted scale of treatment, a subtle under-current of masonry. To get into favour with Mr. Seldom Right one had to work one's way up, and any bad mistake would land one back among the strangers. In which case one would be served fairly and squarely, but there the matter would end. For it should be stated at this point that everything about "The Love-a-duck" was good in quality, and lavish in quantity, and the

rooms, in spite of their great size, were always spotlessly clean. Having carefully considered the relative values of this human panorama, the landlord would single out some individual fortunate enough to catch his momentary favour, and in a voice which seemed to make the glasses tremble, and the little Chelsea figures on the high mantel-shelf gasp with surprise, he would exclaim:

"Well, Mr. Topsmith, and how are we? Right on the top o' life? Full of beans, bone, blood, and benevolence, eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

And the laugh would clatter among the tankards, twist the gas-bracket, go rolling down the corridors, and make the dogs bark in the kennels beyond the stables.

And Mr. Topsmith would naturally blush, and spill his beer, and say:

"Oh, thank you, sir, nothin' to grumble about; pretty good goin' altogether."

"That's right! that's RIGHT!"

There were plenty of waitresses and attendants at "The Love-a-duck," but however busy the bars might be, the landlord himself always dined at seven-thirty precisely, with his wife and daughter, in the oblong parlour at the back of the saloon bar. And they dined simply and prodigiously. A large steaming leg of mutton would be carried in, and in twenty minutes' time would return a forlorn white fragment of bone. Great dishes of fried potatoes, cabbages, and marrow would all vanish. A Stilton cheese would come back like an over-explored ruin of some ancient Assyrian town. And Mine Host would mellow these simple delicacies with three or four tankards of old ale. Occasionally some of the cronies and characters were invited to join the repast, but whoever was there, the shouts and laughter of the landlord rang out above everything, only seconded by the breezy giggles of Mrs. Wright, whose voice would be constantly heard exclaiming: "Oh, Jim, you are a fule!"

It was when the dinner was finished that the landlord merged into the president. He produced a long churchwarden, and ambled hither and thither with a pompous, benevolent, consciously proprietary air. The somewhat stilted formality of his first appearance expanded into a genial but autocratic courtliness. He was an Edwardian of Edwardians. He could be surprisingly gracious, tactful, and charming, and he also had that Hanoverian faculty of seeing right through one—a perfectly crushing mannerism.

By slow degrees he would gently shepherd his favourite flock around the fire in the large bar parlour, decorated with stags' heads, pewter and old Chelsea. Then he would settle himself in the corner of the ingle-nook by the right side of the fire. Perhaps at this time I may be allowed to enumerate a few of the unbreakable rules which the novice had to learn by degrees. They were as follows:

You must always address the landlord as "sir."

You must never interrupt him in the course of a story.

You must never appear to disbelieve him.

You must never tell a bigger lie than he has just told.

If he offers you a drink you must accept it.

You must never under any circumstances offer to stand him a drink in return.

You may ask his opinion about anything, but never any question about his personal affairs.

You may disagree with him, but you must not let him think that you're not taking him seriously.

You must not get drunk.

These were the broad abstract rules. There were other by-laws and covenants allowing for variable degrees of interpretation. That, for instance, which governed the improper story. A story could be suggestive but must never be flagrantly vulgar or profane. Also one might have had enough to drink to make one garrulous, but not enough to be boisterous, or maudlin, or even over-familiar.

I have stated that the quality of fare supplied at "The Love-a-duck" was excellent, and so it was. Beyond that, however, our landlord had his own special reserves. There was a little closet just off the central bar where, on occasions, he would suddenly disappear, and when in the humour produce some special bottle of old port or liqueur. He would come toddling with it back to his seat and exclaim:

"Gentlemen, this is the birthday of Her Imperial Highness the Princess Eulalie of Spain. I must ask you to drink her good health and prosperity!"

And the bar, who had never heard of the Princess Eulalie of Spain, would naturally do so with acclamation.

Over the little glasses he would tell most impressive and incredible stories. He had hunted lions with the King of Abyssinia. He had dined with the Czar of Russia. He had been a drummer-boy during the North and South war in America. He had

travelled all over Africa, Spain, India, China and Japan. There was no crowned head in either of the hemispheres with whom he was not familiar. He knew everything there was to know about diamonds, oil, finance, horses, politics, Eastern religions, ratting, dogs, geology, women, political economy, tobacco, corn, or rubber. He was a prolific talker, but he did not object to listening, and he enjoyed an argument. In every way he was a difficult man to place. Perhaps in thinking of him one was apt not to make due allowance for the rather drab background against which his personality stood out so vividly. One must first visualise the company of "The Love-a-duck."

There was old Hargreaves, the local estate agent, a snuffy, gingery, pinched old ruffian, with a pretty bar-side manner, an infinite capacity for listening politely; one whose nature had been completely bowdlerised by years of showing unlikely tenants over empty houses, and keeping cheerful in draughty passages. There was Mr. Bean, the corn-merchant, with a polished, red-blue face and no voice. He would sit leaning forward on a gold-knobbed cane, and as the evening advanced he seemed to melt into one vast ingratiating smile. One dreaded every moment that the stick would give way and that he would fall forward on his face. There was an argumentative chemist, whose name I have forgotten; he was a keen-faced man, and he wore gold-rimmed spectacles which made him look much cleverer than he really was. There was old Phene Sparfitt. Nobody knew how he lived. He was very old, much too old to be allowed out at night, but quite the most regular and persistent customer. He drank quantities of gin-and-water, his lower lip was always moist, and he professed an intimate knowledge of the life of birds. Dick Toom, the owner of the local livery-stables, was a spasmodic visitor. He generally came accompanied by several horsey-looking gentlemen. He always talked breezily about some distressing illness he was suffering from, and would want to make a bet with anyone present about some quite ridiculous proposition: for instance—that the distance from the cross-roads to the stone wall by Jenkins's black-pig farm was greater than the distance from the fountain in the middle of Piccadilly Circus to the tube station in Dover Street. A great number of these bets took place in the bar, and the fact that the landlord always lost was one of the reasons of his nickname.

It cannot be said that the general standard of intelligence reached a very high level, and against it it was difficult to tell quite how intelligent the landlord was. If he was not a well-educated man, he certainly had more than a veneer of education. In an argument he was seldom extended. Sometimes he talked brilliantly for a moment, and then seemed to talk out of his hat. He had an extravagant theatrical way of suddenly declaiming a statement, and then sinking his voice and repeating it. Sometimes he would be moodish and not talk at all. But at his best he was very good company.

It would be idle to pretend that the frequenters of the bar believed the landlord's stories. On the contrary, I'm afraid we were a very sceptical lot. Most of us had never been farther than London or the sea-side, and our imagination shied at episodes in Rajahs' palaces, and receptions in Spanish courts. It became a byword in the town: "Have you heard old Seldom Right's latest?" Nevertheless, he was extremely popular. At the time of which I write the landlord must have been well over sixty years of age, and his wife was possibly forty-five. They appeared to be an extremely happy and united family.

And then Septimus Stourway appeared on the scene. He was an acid, angular, middle-aged man, with sharp features, a heavy black moustache, and eyes too close together. He was a chartered accountant, and he came to the town to audit the books of a large brewery near-by, and one or two other concerns. He brought his wife and his son, who was eleven years old. He was a man whom everybody disliked from the very beginning and never got over it. He was probably clever at his job, quick-thinking, self-opinionative, aggressively assertive, and altogether objectionable.

The very first occasion on which he visited "The Love-a-duck" he broke every rule of the masonic ring except the one which concerned getting drunk. The company was in session under its president, and he bounced into the circle and joined in the conversation. He interrupted the landlord in the middle of a story and plainly hinted that he didn't believe him. He called him "old chap" and offered to stand him a drink. He then told a long, boring story about some obscure episode in his own life. The effect of this intrusion was that the landlord, who never replied to him at all, rose heavily from his seat and disappeared. The rest of the company tried to show by their chilling unresponsive-

ness that they disapproved of him. But Mr. Stourway was not the kind of person to be sensitive to this. He rattled on, occasionally taking tiny sips of his brandy-and-water. He even had the audacity to ask old Hargreaves who the fat, disagreeable old buffer was! And poor old Hargreaves was so upset he nearly cried. He could only murmur feebly: "He's the landlord."

"H'm! a nice sort of landlord! Now I knew a landlord at——"

The company gradually melted away and left the stranger to sip his brandy-and-water alone.

Everybody hoped, of course, that this first visit would also be the last. But oh, no! the next evening at the same time in bounced Mr. Septimus Stourway, quite uncrushed. Again the landlord disappeared, and the company melted away. The third night some of them tried snubbing him and being rude, but it had no effect at all. At every attempt of this sort he merely laughed in his empty way, and exclaimed: "My dear fellow, just listen to me——"

Before a week was out Mr. Septimus Stourway began to get on the nerves of the town. He swaggered about the streets as though he was doing us a great honour by being there at all. His wife and son were also seen. His wife was a tall, vinegary-looking woman in a semi-fashionable, semi-sporting get-up. She wore a monocle and a short skirt, and carried a cane. The boy was a spectacled, round-shouldered, unattractive-looking youth, more like the mother than the father in appearance. He never seemed to leave his mother's side for an instant.

It appeared that his name was Nick, and that he was the most remarkable boy for his age who had ever lived. He knew Latin, and Greek, and French, and history, and mathematics, and philosophy, and science. Also he had a beautiful nature. Mr. Stourway spent hours boring any one he could get to listen with the narration of his son's marvellous attributes. If the habitués of "The Love-a-duck" tired of Mr. Stourway, they became thoroughly fed up with his son.

It was on the following Wednesday evening that the dramatic incident happened in the bar-parlour of the famous inn. The landlord had continued his attitude of utter indifference to the interloper. He had been just as cheerful and entertaining; only when Mr. Stourway entered the bar he simply dried up. But during the last two days he appeared to be thinking abstractedly about something. He was annoyed.

On this Wednesday evening the usual company had again assembled and the landlord appeared anxious to resume his former position of genial host, when in came Mr. Stourway again. He had not been in the previous evening, and every one was hoping that at last he had realised that he was not wanted. Up rose the landlord at once and went away. There was an almost uncontrolled groan from the rest. Mr. Stourway took his seat, and began to talk affably.

It was then observed that the landlord, instead of going right away, was hovering about behind the bar. I don't know how the conversation got round to poetry, but after a time Mr. Stourway started talking about his son's marvellous memory for poetry.

"That boy of mine, you know," he said, "he would simply astound you. He remembers everything. The poetry he's learnt off by heart! miles and miles of it! I don't suppose there's another boy of his age in the country who could quote half as much."

It was then the bomb-shell fell. The landlord was leaning across the bar and suddenly his enormous voice rang out:

"I'll bet you five pounds to one that I know a little boy of five who could quote twice as much poetry as your son!"

There was a dead silence, and everybody looked from the landlord to Mr. Stourway. That gentleman grinned superciliously, then he rubbed his hands together and said:

"Well, well, that's interesting. I can't believe it. My son's eleven. A boy of five? Ha, ha! I'd like to get a wager like that!"

The landlord's voice, louder than ever, exclaimed:

"I'll bet you a hundred pounds to five!"

Mr. Stourway looked slightly alarmed, but his eyes glittered.

"A hundred pounds to five! I'm not a betting man, but by God! I'd take that."

"Is your son shy?"

"Oh, no; he enjoys reciting poetry."

"Would he come here and have an open competition?"

"H'm! well, well, I don't know. He might. I should have to ask his mother. Who is this wonderful boy you speak of?"

"My nephew over at Chagham. They could drive him over in the dog-cart."

It need hardly be said that the members

of "The Love-a-duck" fraternity were worked up to a great state of excitement over this sudden challenge. What did it mean? No one knew that old Seldom Right had any relations in the county. But then, he was always such a secretive old boy about his own affairs. Could a little boy of five possibly remember and repeat more poetry—twice as much more!—than this phenomenal Nick Stourway? How was it all to be arranged?

It became evident, however, that the landlord was very much in earnest. He had apparently thought out all the details. It should be an open competition. It could take place in the ball-room of the hotel. The two boys should stand on the platform with their parents and should recite poems or blank verse in turn. A small committee of judges should count the lines. When one had exhausted his complete répertoire, the other of course would have won; but it would be necessary for Stephen—that was the name of old Wright's nephew—to go on for double the number of lines that Nick had spoken to win the wager.

When it was first put to him Mr. Stourway looked startled, but on going into the details he soon became eager. It was the easiest way of making a hundred pounds he had ever encountered. Of course the little boy might be clever and have a good memory, but that he could possibly recite twice as much as the wonderful Nick was unthinkable. Moreover his back was up, and he hated the landlord. He knew that he snubbed him on every occasion, and this would be an opportunity to score. There was just the mild risk of losing a fiver, and his wife to be talked over, but—he thought he could persuade her.

The rumour of the competition spread like wild-fire all over the town.

It was not only the chief topic of conversation at "The Love-a-duck," but at all places where men met and talked. It cannot be denied that a considerable number of bets were made. Seldom Right's tremendous optimism found him many supporters, but the great odds and the fact that he invariably lost in wagers of this sort drove many into the opposing camp of backers.

A committee of ways and means was appointed the following night after Mrs. Septimus Stourway had given her consent, and Nick had signified his willingness to display his histrionic abilities to a crowd of admirers.

Old Hargreaves, Mr. Bean, and a schoolmaster named McFarlane were appointed the judges. The ball-room was to be open to any one, and there was to be no charge for admission. The date of the competition was fixed for the following Saturday afternoon, at five o'clock.

I must now apologise for intruding my own personality into this narrative. I would rather not do so, but it is inevitable. It is true, my part in the proceedings was only that of a spectator, but from your point of view—and from mine—it was an exceedingly important part. I must begin with the obvious confession that I had visited "The Love-a-duck" on occasions, and that is the kind of adventure that one naturally doesn't make too much of. Nevertheless I can say with a clear conscience that I was not one of the inner ring. I had so far only made the most tentative efforts to get into the good graces of the landlord. But every one in Tibbelsford was talking of the forthcoming remarkable competition, and I naturally made a point of turning up in good time.

I managed to get a seat in the fourth row, and I was very fortunate, for the ball-room was packed, and a more remarkable competition I have never attended. The three judges sat in the front row, facing the platform. The Stourway party occupied the right side of the platform and the Wrights the left. The landlord sat with his party, but in the centre, so that he could act as a kind of chairman. He appeared to be in high good-humour, and he came on first and made a few facetious remarks before the performance began. In the first place, he apologised for the lighting. It was certainly very bad. There originally had been footlights, but it was so long since they had been used that they were out of repair. The large room was only lighted by a gas chandelier in the centre, so that the stage was somewhat dim, but, as he explained, this would only help to obscure the blushes of the performers when they received the plaudits of such a distinguished gathering.

The Stourway party entered first. They came in from a door at the back of the platform. Mr. Stourway noisily nonchalant, talking to every one at random, in a tail-coat, with grey spats; his wife in a sports skirt and a small hat, looking rather bored and disgusted; and the boy in an Eton jacket and collar, with a bunchy tie, and his hair neatly brushed. He looked very much at home and confident. It was obvious that he was out to enjoy himself. Numerous prize-distributions at which he

had played a conspicuous part had evidently inured him to such an ordeal.

And then the other party entered, and the proceedings seemed likely to end before they had begun. Mrs. Wright came on first, followed by a lady dressed in black leading a most diminutive boy. They only reached the door when apparently the sight of this large audience frightened the small person and he began to cry. The landlord and his wife rushed up and with the mother tried to encourage him, and after a few minutes they succeeded in doing so. The lady in black, however—who was presumably the widowed mother—picked him up and carried him in and sat him on her knee.

The audience became keenly excited, and every one was laughing and discussing whether the affair would materialise or not. At length things seemed to be arranged, and the landlord came forward and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to the competitors—Master Nick Stourway, Master Stephen Wright. Good gracious! It sounds as though I were announcing the competitors in a prize-ring. But this is to be a very peaceful competition—at least, I hope so! I think you all know the particulars. We're simply going to enjoy ourselves, aren't we, Nick? Aren't we, Stephen?"

Nick smiled indulgently and said, "Yes, sir."

Stephen glanced up at him for a second, and then buried his face in his mother's lap.

"Well, well," said the landlord. "I will now call on Master Nick to open the ball."

Master Nick was nothing loath. He stood up and bowed; and holding his right arm stiffly and twiddling a button of his waistcoat with his left, he declaimed in ringing tones:

"It was the schooner 'Hesperus'
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughter
To bear him company."

There were twenty-two verses of this, of four lines each, and the audience were somewhat impatient, because they had not come there to hear Master Nick recite. They had come for the competition, and it was still an open question whether there would be any competition. They were anxiously watching Master Stephen. He spent most of the period of his rival's recitation of this long poem with his face buried in his mother's lap, in the dark corner of the platform. His mother stroked his hair and kept on whispering a word to him, and occasionally he would peer round at Nick and watch him for a few seconds; then he glanced at the audience and immediately ducked out of sight again.

When Nick had finished he bowed and sat down, and there was a mild round of applause. The judges consulted, and agreed that he had scored 88 lines.

Now what was going to happen?

The small boy seemed to be shaking his head and stamping his feet, and his mother was talking to him. The landlord coughed. He was obviously a little nervous. He went over to the group and said in a cheerful voice:

"Now, Stephen, tell us a poem."

A little piping voice said "No!" and there were all the wriggles and shakes of the recalcitrant youngster. Murmurs ran round the room, and a lot of people were laughing. The Stourway party was extremely amused. At length the landlord took a chair near him, and produced a long stick of barley-sugar.

"Now, Stephen," he said, "if you won't talk to these naughty people, tell *me* a poem. Tell me that beautiful 'Hymn to Apollo' you told me last winter."

The little boy looked up at him and grinned; then he looked at his mother. Her widow's veil covered the upper part of her face. She kissed him and said:

"Go on, dear. Tell Uncle Jim!"

There was a pause; the small boy looked up and down, and then, fixing his eyes solemnly on the landlord's face, he suddenly began in a queer little lisping voice:

"God of the golden bow,
And of the golden lyre,
And of the golden hair
And of the golden fire:
Charioteer
Round the patient year,
Where—where slept thine ire?"

It was a short poem, but its rendering was received with vociferous applause. There was going to be a competition, after all! People who had money at stake were laughing and slapping their legs, and people who hadn't were doing the same. Every one was on the best of terms with each other. There was a certain amount of trouble with the judges, as they didn't know the poem, and they didn't grasp the length of the lines. Fortunately the schoolmaster had come armed with books,

and after some discussion the poem was found to have been written by Keats, and Master Stephen was awarded 36 lines. He was cheered, clapped, and kissed by the landlord, and his aunt, and his mother.

Master Nick's reply to this was to recite "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a performance which bored every one to tears, especially as he would persist in gesticulating, and doing it in a manner as though he thought that the people had simply come to hear his performance. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is 195 lines. This made his score 283.

The small boy was still very shy, and seemed disinclined to continue, but the landlord said:

"Now, come on, Stephen, I'm sure you remember some more beautiful poetry."

At last, to every one's surprise, he began to lisp:

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . ."

It was screamingly funny. He went right through the speech, and when he got to:

"Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'"

the applause was deafening. People were calling out, and some of the barrackers had to be rebuked by the landlord. King Henry's speech was only 35 lines, so Master Stephen's total was 71. Nick then retaliated with an appalling poem, which commenced:

"She stood at the bar of justice,
A creature wan and wild,
In form too small for a woman,
In feature too old for a child."

Fortunately it was not quite so long as the other two, and only brought him 60 lines, making a total of 343.

Stephen, who seemed to be gaining a little more confidence and entering into the spirit of the thing, replied with Robert Herrick's "Ode to a Daffodil," a charming little effort, although it only brought in 20 lines.

Master Nick now broke into Shakespeare, and let himself go on:

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

He only did 23 lines, however, before he broke down and forgot. The committee had arranged for this. It was agreed that in the event of either competitor breaking down, he should still score the lines up to where he broke down, and at the end he should be allowed to quote odd lines, provided there were more than one.

At this point there was a very amusing incident. Master Stephen hesitated for some time, and then *he* began, "Friends, Romans, countrymen," etc., and he went right through the same speech without a slip! It was the first distinct score for the landlord's party, and Master Stephen was credited with 128 lines. The scores, however, were still 366 to 219 in Nick's favour, and he proceeded to pile on the agony by reciting "Beth Gelert." However, at the end of the twelfth verse he again forgot, and only amassed 48 lines.

Balanced against his mother's knee, and looking unutterably solemn—as far as one could see in the dim light—and only occasionally glancing at the audience, Stephen then recited a charming poem by William Blake, called "Night," which also contained 48 lines.

Nick then collected 40 lines with "Somebody's Darling," and as a contrast to this sentimental twaddle Stephen attempted Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." Unfortunately, it was his turn to break down, but not till he had notched 92 lines. It was quite a feature of the afternoon that whereas Nick's contributions for the most part were the utmost trash, Stephen only did good things.

It would perhaps be tedious to chronicle the full details of the poems attempted and the exact number of lines scored, although, as a matter of fact, at the time I did keep a careful record. But on that afternoon it did not appear tedious, except when Nick let himself go rather freely over some quite commonplace verse. Even then there was always the excitement as to whether he would break down. The audience indeed found it thrilling, and it became more and more exciting as it went on, for it became apparent that both boys were getting to the end of their tether. They both began to forget, and the judges were kept very busy, and the parents were as occupied as seconds in a prize-ring. It must have been nearly half-past six when Master Nick eventually gave out. He started odds and ends, and forgot, and his parents were pulled up for prompting. He collected a few odd lines, and amassed a total of 822, a very considerable amount for a boy of his age.

At this point he was leading by 106 lines. So for Stephen to win the wager for the landlord he would not only have to score that odd 106, but he would have to remember an additional 822 lines! And he already gave evidence of forgetting! There was a fresh burst of betting in odd parts of the hall, and Dick Toom was offering ten to one against the landlord's protégé and not getting many takers. The great thing in his favour was that he seemed to have quite lost his nervousness. He was keen on the job, and he seemed to realise that it *was* a competition, and that he had got to do his utmost. The landlord's party were allowed to talk to him and to make suggestions, but not to prompt if he forgot. There was a short interval, in which milk and other drinks were handed round. The landlord had one of the other drinks, and then he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to ask your indulgence, to be as quiet as possible. My small nephew has to recall 928 lines to win the competition, and he is going to try and do it."

The announcement was received with cheers. And then Stephen started again. He began excellently with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," and scored 80 lines, and without any pause went on to Milton's "L'Allegro," of which he delivered 126 lines before breaking down. He paused a little and then did odds and ends of verses, some complete, and some not. Thomas Hood's "Departure of Summer" (14 lines), Shelley's "To-Night" (35), and a song by Shelley commencing:

"Rarely, rarely comest thou,
Spirit of Delight!" (48 lines)

I will not enumerate all these poems, but he amassed altogether 378 lines in this way. Then he had another brief rest, and reverted once more to Shakespeare. In his little sing-song voice, without any attempt at dramatic expression, he reeled off 160 lines of the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet*; 96 lines of the scene between Hamlet and the Queen; 44 lines of the Brutus and Cassius quarrel; 31 of Jaques's speech on "All the world's a stage." It need hardly be said that by this time the good burghers of Tibbelsford were in a state of the wildest excitement.

The schoolmaster announced that Master Stephen had now scored 689 of the requisite 928, so that he only wanted 240 more to win. Mr. Stourway was biting his nails and looking green. Mrs. Stourway looked as though she was disgusted with her husband for having brought her among these common people. Nick sneered superciliously.

But in the meantime there was no question but that Master Stephen himself was getting distressed. His small voice was getting huskier and huskier, and tears seemed not far off. I heard Mrs. Rushbridger, sitting behind me, remark:

"Poor little mite! I calls it a shime!"

It was also evident that he was getting seriously to the end of his quoting répertoire. He had no other long speeches. The landlord's party gathered round him and whispered.

He tried again, short stanzas and odd verses, sometimes unfinished. He kept the schoolmaster very busy; but he blundered on. By these uncertain stages he managed to add another 127 lines, and then he suddenly brought off a veritable *tour de force*. It was quite uncanny. He quoted 109 lines of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"! The matter was quite unintelligible to the audience, and they were whispering to each other and asking what it was. When he broke down, the schoolmaster announced that it was quite in order, and that Master Stephen's total lines quoted now amounted to 1640, and that therefore he only required four lines to win!

Even then the battle was apparently not over. Every one was cheering and making such a noise that the small boy could not understand it, and he began crying. A lot of people in the audience were calling out "Shame!" and there was all the appearance of a disturbance. The landlord's party was very occupied. It was several minutes before order was restored, and then the landlord rapped on the table and called out, "Order! order!"

He drank a glass of water, and there was a dead silence. Stephen's mother held the little boy very tight, and smiled at him. At last, raising his voice for this last despairing effort, he declaimed quite loudly:

"Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the two Worlds so wisely—they are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn,
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust."

The cheers which greeted this triumphant climax were split by various disturbances, the most distressing coming from Stephen

himself, for almost as he uttered the last word he gave a yell, and burst into sobs. And he sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed. And his mother picked him up and rocked him, and the landlord and his wife did what they could. But it was quite hopeless. Stephen was finished. His mother picked him up and hurried out of the door at the back with him. The Stourway party melted away. There were no more speeches, but people crowded on to the platform, and a lot of the women wanted just to kiss Stephen before he went away; but Mrs. Wright came back and said the poor child was very upset. She was afraid they ought not to have let him do it. His mother was putting him to bed in one of the rooms, and they were giving him some sal volatile. He would be all right soon. Of course, it was a tremendous effort; such a tiny person too!

Some one offered to go for the doctor, but Mrs. Wright said they would see how he was, and if he wasn't better in half an hour's time they'd send over to Doctor Winch.

Every one was congratulating the landlord, and he was clasping hands and saying:

"A marvellous boy! a marvellous boy! I knew he would do it!"

The party gradually broke up.

I must now again revert to myself. I was enormously impressed by what I had seen and heard, and for the rest of the evening I could think of nothing else. After dinner I went out for a stroll. It was early March, and unseasonably cold. When I got down to the bridge, over which the high-road runs across the open country to Tisehurst, large snowflakes were falling. I stood there for some time, looking at our dim little river, and thinking of the landlord and Stephen. And as I gazed around me I began to wonder what it was about the snow-flakes which seemed to dovetail with certain subconscious movements going on within me.

And suddenly a phrase leapt into my mind. It was:

"Rotten cotton gloves!"

Rotten cotton gloves! What was the connection? The snow, the mood, something about Stephen's voice quoting "The Faerie Queene." Very slowly the thing began to unfold itself. And when I began to realise it all, I said to myself, "Yes, my friend; it was the Faerie Queene which gave the show away. The rest might have been possible. You were getting rather hard put to it!"

The snow was falling heavily. It was Christmas-time—good lord! I did not like to think how long ago! Thirty years? Forty years? My sister and I at Drury Lane pantomime. "Rotten cotton gloves"! Yes, that was it! I could remember nothing at all of the performance. But who was that great man they spoke of? the Star attraction?—some name like "the great Borodin," the world's most famous humorist and ventriloquist. We were very excited, Phyllis and I, very small people then, surely not much older than Stephen himself. I could not remember the great Borodin, but I remembered that one phrase. There was a small lay figure which said most amusing things. It was called—no, I have forgotten. It was dressed in an Eton suit and it wore rather dilapidated-looking white cotton gloves. And every now and then, in the middle of a dialogue or discourse, it broke off, looked at its hands, and muttered:

"Rotten cotton gloves!"

It became a sort of catch-phrase in London in those days. On buses and trains people would murmur, "Rotten cotton gloves!" A certain vague something about the way that Stephen recited Spenser's "Faerie Queene". . . . Was it possible?

And then certain very definite aspects of the competition presented themselves to my mind's eye. It had all been very cleverly stage-managed. It must be observed that Stephen neither walked on nor walked off. He did not even stand. He hardly looked at the audience. And then, the lighting was inexcusably bad. Even some of the lights in the central chandelier had unaccountably failed. And the landlord's party had chosen the darkest side of the stage. No one had spoken to the boy. No one had seen him arrive, and immediately after the competition he had gone straight to bed.

I tried to probe my memory for knowledge of "the great Borodin," but at eight or nine one does not take great interest in these details. I know there was something . . . I remember hearing my parents talking about it—some great scandal soon after I had seen him. He was disgraced, I am sure. I have a vague idea he was in some way well-connected. He was to marry a great lady, and then perhaps he eloped with a young barmaid? I cannot be certain. It was something like that. I know he disappeared from public life, for in after years, when people had been to similar performances, I had heard our parents say:

"Ah, but you should have seen 'The Great Borodin.'"

These memories, the peculiar thrill of the competition, the cold air, the lazy snow-flakes drifting hither and thither, all excited me. I walked on farther and farther into the country, trying to piece it all together. I liked the landlord, and I shared the popular dislike of Mr. Stourway.

After a time I returned, and making my way towards the north of the town, I started to walk quickly in the direction of "The Love-a-duck." If I hurried, I should be there ten minutes or so before closing-time.

When I entered the large bar-parlour the place was very crowded. I met old Hargreaves by the door. I'm afraid a good many rules of the society had been broken that evening. Old Hargreaves was not the only one who had had quite enough liquid refreshment. Everybody was in high spirits, and they were still all talking about the competition. I met Mr. Bean near the fireplace, and I said:

"Well, Mr. Bean, and have you heard how the boy is?"

"Oh, ay," he replied. "He soon got all right. Mrs. Wright says he were just a bit upset. He went off home not an hour since."

"Did you see him?"

"Eh? Oh, no, I didn't see 'm. Mrs. Wright says he looked quite hisself."

The landlord was moving ponderously up and down behind the bar. I thought he looked tired, and there were dark rims round his eyes. I moved up towards the bar, and he didn't notice me. The noise of talking was so loud that one could speak in a normal voice without being heard. Everything had apparently gone off quite successfully. Mr. Stourway had sent along his cheque for five pounds, and it was reckoned that he would never show his face in "The Love-a-duck" again. I waited.

At last I noticed that the landlord was quite alone. He was leaning against the serving-hatch, flicking some crumbs from his waistcoat, as though waiting for the moment of release. I took my glass and sidled up to him. I leant forward as though to speak. He glanced at me, and inclined his head with a bored movement. When his ear was within a reasonable distance I said quietly:

"Rotten cotton gloves!"

I shall never forget the expression on the face of the landlord as he slowly raised his head. I was conscious of being a pin-point in a vast perspective. His large, rather colourless eyes appeared to sweep the whole room. They were moreover charged with a perfectly controlled expression of surprise and a kind of uncontrolled lustre of ironic humour. I had a feeling that if he laughed it would be the end of all things. He did not laugh; he looked lugubriously right through my face, and breathed heavily. Then he swayed slightly from side to side and looked at my hat, and said:

"I've got some cherry-brandy here you'd like. You must have a glass, Mr. ——"

Now I do not wish to appear to you either as a prig, a traitor or a profiteer. I am indeed a very ordinary, perhaps over-human member of Tibbelsford society. If I have taken certain advantages of the landlord, you must at any rate give me the credit of being the only member of a large audience who had the right intuitions at the right moment. In all other respects you must acknowledge that I have treated him rather well. In any case, I became prominent in the inner circle without undergoing the tortuous novitiateship of the casual stranger.

The landlord and I are the best of friends to this day, although we exchange no confidences. I can break all the rules of the masonic understanding without getting into trouble. Some of the others are amazed at the liberties I take.

And in these days, when licensing restrictions are so severe, when certain things are not to be got (officially), and when I see my friends stealing home to a bone-dry supper, I only have to creep into the bar of "The Love-a-duck" and whisper "Rotten cotton gloves!" and lo! all these forbidden luxuries are placed at my disposal. Can you blame me?

I have said that we exchange no confidences, and indeed I feel that that would be going too far, taking too great an advantage of my position. There is only one small point I would love to clear up, and I dare not ask. Presuming my theory to be right about "The Great Borodin"—which was he?

The landlord? Or the widow?